

AU/ACSC/5585/AY06

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

# THE MAKING OF A GREAT CAPTAIN

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

April 2006

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>APR 2006</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2006 to 00-00-2006</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Making of a Great Captain</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Air University Press (AUL/LP),131 W Shumacher Avenue,Maxwell AFB,AL,36112-6615</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>Classifying people as Great Captains is largely a subjective perception. What attributes, accomplishments, positions attained or battles won that make one person a Great Captain and the other not? Herein lays the dilemma, for ages academics have argued what criteria should be included or not, but it remains a highly subjective yet colloquial anti-analytical process. This paper examines the argument that Great Captains are a product of their family, highly educated from an early age, possess qualities of a genius, encounter grand life experiences compared to their contemporaries, espouse leadership from a young age, and capsule their experiences by mastering their cultural ethos with domineering influence via political-military accomplishments. This examination will look into the education, life experiences, leadership, and ethos mastering of Gustavus Adolphus, Napoleon, and Grant. This examination will be analytical in nature and highlight those common attributes that carry across the ages of Great Captains. Armed with this information, it may be possible to prospect future leaders, appropriately guide and develop their maturation defining the cultural ethos of tomorrow's political military society.</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>31</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

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## **THESIS STATEMENT**

Great Captains are not born, but the product of a strong education and varying life experiences, which gives them the tools to master their national ethos.

## **ABSTRACT**

Classifying people as Great Captains is largely a subjective perception. What attributes, accomplishments, positions attained or battles won that make one person a Great Captain and the other not? Herein lays the dilemma, for ages academics have argued what criteria should be included or not, but it remains a highly subjective yet colloquial anti-analytical process. This paper examines the argument that Great Captains are a product of their family, highly educated from an early age, possess qualities of a genius, encounter grand life experiences compared to their contemporaries, espouse leadership from a young age, and capsule their experiences by mastering their cultural ethos with domineering influence via political-military accomplishments. This examination will look into the education, life experiences, leadership, and ethos mastering of Gustavus Adolphus, Napoleon, and Grant. This examination will be analytical in nature and highlight those common attributes that carry across the ages of Great Captains. Armed with this information, it may be possible to prospect future leaders, appropriately guide and develop their maturation defining the cultural ethos of tomorrow's political military society.

## **THE MAKING OF A GREAT CAPTAIN**

Classifying people as Great Captains is largely a subjective perception. What attributes, accomplishments, positions attained or battles won that make one person a Great Captain and the other not? Herein lays the dilemma, for ages academics have argued what criteria should be included or not, but it remains a highly subjective yet colloquial process. Scholars typically concur that Great Captains are very intelligent, to the extent that they are laden with genius to foresee and sculpt battles with grace and impunity but have failed to show a correlation of actual genius. They also praise warrior ethos in battle and generally, measure success by the amount of territory conquered, the number of battles won, or duration of reign. Similarly, discussing leadership and bravado provides little insight to how Great Captains garnered those skills yet appears to be a key ingredient to their success. Yet another factor common to various arguments relates to a legacy in historical significance to the way they waged war. Tactics, technology, and methodologies indicative to success and attributable to a Great Captain carry an amount of stigmata. Given the classical debates, it is not possible to score past leaders and say who the best was. However, examining a cross section of those considered Great Captains makes it possible to ascertain key commonalities. This paper examines the argument that Great Captains possess attributes of a genius, are a product of their family, highly educated from an early age, and capsule their experiences by mastering their cultural ethos with domineering influence via political-military accomplishments. This examination will sample the education, life experiences, leadership development, and ethos mastering of Gustavus Adolphus, Napoleon, and Grant. This examination will highlight those common attributes that carry across the ages of Great Captains. Armed

with this information, it may be possible to prospect future leaders, appropriately guide and develop their maturation defining the cultural ethos of tomorrow's political military society.

## **GENIUS**

Many people use the term genius to describe the mental capacity of someone when they describe them. However, genius may be an overly used term and just as likely misunderstood. Many psychologists and scholars over the centuries have worked diligently to determine what exactly genius means. For the nonprofessional, we may think that a genius is someone who possesses the qualities of brilliance, master-mindedness, intellect or simply an outstanding talent to grasp copious sums of information and digest it. Though these ideas might be true in part, those who have studied genius see it differently. Genius is a special combination of superb intellect and creativity.<sup>1</sup> However, this is not enough, as the essence is much more about how they combine intellect and creativity. Geniuses go much further beyond having smarts and creativity; they form novel combinations of information in solving primarily new (not existing) problems given their expertise and experiences.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, they connect the unconnected to unveil relationships that others may not see.<sup>3</sup> More simply, geniuses view, correlate and digest information differently than the average person does. Many scholars argue that genius is either genetically obtained or learned but most agree that it is a combination of both.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Begley, "The Puzzle of Genius," *Newsweek* 121, no 26 (28 June 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Given that most Great Captains have long since died it is impossible to assess them with modern venues to determine if they are truly geniuses. However, given the characteristics of genius and comparing that to historical records it is possible to correlate that Great Captains do indeed possess genius. Among the key characteristics are a willingness to seek intellectual risks by merging disparate ideas, combining different modes of thought (left and right side of the brain), introverted in thought, and producing sizeable amounts of both good and bad work.<sup>4</sup> Most interestingly, geniuses tend to revert to the conceptual world of their childhood where they veraciously associate their problems, questions, issues and sensibilities.<sup>5</sup> Genius is then partially a product of their nurturing as they learned how to assimilate at a young age. Childlike thought may also explain why geniuses evanesce and they intellectually peak in their 20s & 30s.<sup>6</sup>

## **RATIONAL & INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT**

The rational and intellectual development of Great Captains is a product of their formative years when they are most likely to acquire the traits they will carry with them throughout life. How were Adolphus, Napoleon and Grant brought up to become who they were? Their young personal associations and educational influences carved their perspectives on life. The influences they underwent are ample to spark the genius within each one of them as they form their mantra.

Gustavus Adolphus was born into nobility as the son of the Swedish King. He was educated in the military art from a young age and by seventeen had engaged in his

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

first war.<sup>7</sup> His upbringing was idealistic including education in politics, literature, and physical development.<sup>8</sup> His father and tutors also imparted strong Protestant beliefs that would eventually provide the fuel rationalizing the invasion of northern Germany against the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>9</sup> His education also included vast language studies. It was known that he spoke and wrote German fluently before he did Swedish, likely the result of his mother's native tongue.<sup>10</sup> Central to his education was his ability to communicate with others. Coupled with his study of politics was that of language and oratory fluency. Ultimately, during his youth he obtained a thorough knowledge and perfect command of Swedish, German, Latin, Dutch, French and Italian as to be comparable with any native of those countries.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he also understood Spanish, English, and Scotch with at least what is understood to be a working knowledge of Polish and Russian as well.<sup>12</sup>

Adolphus' education was very robust and centered on the finest academics of the day. He had several scholars hired to school him but he likely learned the most from in the halls of council and the fields of battle at the hand of his father. Adolphus "...enjoyed a solid, affectionate relationship with a father who provided solid training in

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<sup>7</sup> United States Military Academy Dept of Military Art and Engineering, *Great Captains Before Napoleon* (West Point, N.Y: 1945), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Great Captains Unveiled* (London, U.K.: Da Capo Press, 1996) 80.

<sup>9</sup> United States Military Academy Dept of Military Art and Engineering, *Great Captains Before Napoleon*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Nils Ahnlund, *Gustav Adolf the Great* (New York: Princeton Univ Press, 1940), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 35.



the uncertain crafts of Kingship. The Crown Prince combined supervised study of the leading classical and contemporary military and political theorists with heavy doses of practical experiences.”<sup>13</sup> As such, at the mere age of ten, he was attending council meetings with his father where he could watch and learn to how politics were formulated and would sometimes respond in the name of the crown of Sweden.<sup>14</sup> Undoubtedly, the full array of stout academics bestowed upon him in conjunction with practical exercise formed a superb basis in his making of a king. Unfortunately, this submersion in becoming a king may have forgone social interaction with more children his age. But, as far as Adolphus knew and understood the combination of his family’s teachings, those of his scholars and other nobles he considered his peers, came together to form the social foundation of his rational intellect and intellectual development. Similarly, formal and consistent education was a part of Napoleon’s life.

Napoleon was born as the son of a minor nobleman on the island of Corsica, which by language and tradition was Italian, but had just been ceded to France the year prior to his birth. Most records of his youth point to an assertive yet introspective boy that was preoccupied with soldiering.<sup>15</sup> At the age of nine, he spent a preliminary year of military school at Autun.<sup>16</sup> At the age of ten Napoleon set off for military school at Brienne where for the first time he learned French. From there, he moved on to the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, xv.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 35.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Livesay, *Great Commanders and Their battles* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) 96.

<sup>16</sup> David G. Chandler, *Napoleon* (South Yorkshire, U.K.: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd., 1973) 15.

“Ecole Militaire” in Paris five years later and would ace the school in one year versus two.<sup>17</sup> What propagates his formative years is that he spent most of his time away from his family and possibly replaced them with that of the military except for a few years when his elder brother would accompany him at Brienne. The military would serve to be his place of learning and he would undoubtedly form much of his perspective on life via skewed interaction with his contemporaries. Amongst his peers he was not highly regarded and that coupled with sense of being uniquely different and quiet provided time for him to be introspective and master some aspects of academics, particularly math. However, he did care for his family, especially his mother who he missed dearly. His time away from Corsica was described as lonely and stricken with homesickness.<sup>18</sup>

Napoleon’s youth was characterized by a combination of yearning to be with his real family and a notion to prove to the rest of the world that he was able and capable. That was largely in part because of the “chip on his shoulder” for being Corsican and complicated by his physical stature only to be exacerbated by his introverted nature. Similar to Napoleon, parental influence played a large role in the life of young Grant as was education an emphasis.

Grant was born to a successful business owner who vowed to cherish, support, and provide all of the affection his children would accept. Jesse Grant avoided the military service as sedulously as any pacifist would but ironically sought an appointment

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<sup>17</sup> Anthony Livesay, *Great Commanders and Their battles*, 96.

<sup>18</sup> David G. Chandler, *Napoleon*, 15.

to West Point for his eldest son known as Ulysses.<sup>19</sup> Grant's parents sought to garner the best education possible for him and prevent a haphazard upbringing that the frontier might prove to do otherwise. At the age of five, he was enrolled in a small one-room school in nearby Georgetown. There he would excel at mental arithmetic answering questions before they were even finished by the instructor.<sup>20</sup> More important, teachers noticed the veracity at which Grant would consume any book given to him. His father Jesse taught him how to read and by the age of six he could read unaided any book written for an adult.<sup>21</sup>

The most telling facet of Grant's youth lies in his social interactions with other children. He yearned to be part of groups but rarely took part in play or actually interacted with them and when he did, he sought neither to be a leader or a follower, just existing as part of the situation.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly, Grant interacted with horses much better than with other children his age. At the age of nine, he purchased his first horse. He would spend an enormous amount of time and energy mastering equestrian activities. He especially liked horses as they provided the necessary means of travel that he sought to travel and feed his curiosity to see the wider world.<sup>23</sup> He would also take on the daunting task of breaking the most difficult horses for anyone who asked. Some may have viewed

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<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant Soldier and President* (New York: Random House, 1997) 8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 14.

this as risk taking but for young Grant this was more sport and accomplishment than anything else.

Grant's education was to be further pushed in the classroom at the age of fourteen when he was sent away to school. The school in Kentucky was reputed to providing a demanding education. However, shortly upon his arrival, Grant found that he knew everything they sought to teach him there and once again he became bored until the tedium was broken by his entrance into a local debating society.<sup>24</sup> Therein he thrived and fully enjoyed exploring his emerging mental capacity. The following year, his parents yet again found what they thought to be a challenging school for young Grant and he went off to Ohio. Only to become bored with academics again, he knew the material already; Grant looked forward to a college education that would certainly challenge him. During winter break that year his father eluded that he secured an appointment to West Point for him to which the young Grant replied, "I won't go."<sup>25</sup> Much like his father, he never considered a career as a soldier. This would be the one time that his parents would highly encourage him do something as it was the best avenue to get a college degree. Ulysses set off for West Point not so much to be a soldier, but to escape the inevitable future of being a tanner and get his college education that his parents so valued.<sup>26</sup>

Grant's time at West Point was up and down. He almost left in his first year but decided to stick it out, mostly an issue of disgrace versus pride.<sup>27</sup> The class bully made

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>26</sup> Major General John Frederick Charles Fuller, *Grant and Lee, A Study in Personality and Generalship* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957) 65.

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant Soldier and President*, 24.

an impression. Grant went through three repeated beatings before he learned enough about his opponent to defeat him in such a manner that the five foot one inch, one hundred and seventeen pound Grant was forever respected amongst his peers.<sup>28</sup> About this time Grant undertook Rugby and started equestrian classes where he excelled at both. His academics did show signs of superior mental capacity when he tried to do well. He taught himself algebra and geometry and excelled in science coursework. He would eventually graduate in the lower middle section of his class because of his lack of effort in other areas. Where he did discover himself was as the president of the dialectical society and founder of the twelve-in-one clubs.

The early development of Adolphus, Napoleon and Grant provides some insight as to how they became Great Captains. Each one of them is different in many aspects but each of them also learned a great deal from their environments. Parental influence is very strong amongst all three and they each sought to do well such that the dignity of their family would be maintained. The lack of close friendships at an early age and more importantly, awkward interaction with peers in their teens had solidifying effects from what they already had learned at the hand of their parents. All three had to deal with themselves, lacking direct support due to a loss or separation and thus chose to be introverted, quiet, introspective thinkers to solve in the absence of a guiding parent, such as they did as children. Each of them was also very apt in mathematics while savoring debate. Lastly, societal influences beyond the boundaries of military schools or parliament were not influential. Their perceived societal influences came from their

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 26.

peers amongst the various institutions.

The most telling aspects of their youths are the least obvious. Given their similar demeanor, they each sought to observe and then react with situations and groups of people. They developed the ability to control their impulses with patience. When they observed the right moment to act, they would do so with convincing authority and then move back to an observable stance. Their ability to resolve issues mentally and then react when the timing was right was a product of their personalities. Given this incredible skill, all they needed was to master a profession that would capitalize upon their talent to observe, resolve and react.

## **MILITARY EXPERTISE**

Every Great Captain has in some way or another mastered the military art. How and when they became so eloquent in the military art as compared to their contemporaries varies from one to another. Most Great Captains started learning the facets of military art at a young age. They were impressionable and it became a way of life for them.

Napoleon spent a large part of his childhood in military schools. Adolphus was ever under the watching eye of his father and parliament growing up under the crown. Yet, Grant was one that swayed away from the military until well into his teenage years upon entering West Point. In each case, when subdued to military service for varying reasons they made the profession of arms their life and sought to do as well as possible. When and where possible each made their mark on military history.

Adolphus marked history with his reforms within the Swedish military as the starting point of the modern military. He did not necessarily rebuild the essence of how a military functioned but refined inefficiencies so that it would be more effective.

Specifically, Adolphus instituted permanent units and a hierarchy of command and control backed with stout discipline and training.<sup>29</sup> On an operational level, he skillfully intertwined artillery, infantry and cavalry with new formations that would easily cut through adversarial armies. “He was the first commander in modern times to fulfill and blend the three elemental principles of war-security, mobility, and concentration, the *tria juncta in uno* which constitute the economic application of force to attain the goal...”<sup>30</sup> The accomplishments in revising how his army was both organized and operated was the result of scores of improvements, minor innovations and experimentation. He neither invented anything new nor brought to the operational art drastically changed tactics he simply made them better. Similarly, Napoleon would also bring about minor changes in the operational art.

“As a military theorist Napoleon was neither original nor revolutionary.”<sup>31</sup> It is well documented that Napoleon was well acquainted with artillery and mastered that science early in his military career. However, many people referred to him as a genius in his ability to conceptualize, learn and exploit every detail of a battle that he was about to encounter. This may not be the fact, he was however very energetic and industrious typically working very long days.<sup>32</sup> His success was fueled by his supply method in which his troops would feed off the land allowing quick movement and limited lines of

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Windrow and Francis K. Mason, *A Concise Dictionary of Military Biography* (London: Windrow and Greene Ltd, 1990), 122.

<sup>30</sup> Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *Great Captains Unveiled*, 150.

<sup>31</sup> David G. Chandler, *Napoleon*, 166.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Livesay, *Great Commanders and Their battles*, 96.

communication.<sup>33</sup> This allowed him flexibility and speed to move great distances. To that end, Napoleon would gain the initiative in battle by employing speed, deception and surprise to mount blitzkrieg attacks of great energy outmaneuvering his enemy.<sup>34</sup> Though Napoleon enjoyed freedom of movement during battle, Grant did not have that luxury.

The innovation of the rifle leading into the Civil War changed the nature of combat. Until this innovation, battle was free flowing and Generals were able to thrust upon their enemy with acceptable losses. The one tactical fact was that the rifle in conjunction with the axe and spade had rendered the defense three times stronger than offense.<sup>35</sup> Given the highly defensive nature that the Civil War embodied Generals on both sides had little precedent to overcome the rifle and its tertiary effects. Using better logistical channels and numerically superior numbers in qualitatively similar troops Grant fought a war of attrition. His view of the war from a strategic level mitigating attrition to destroy the enemy's main army before his army's destruction was the strategy by which he won the war.<sup>36</sup>

Though Adolphus and Napoleon would mark military history with innovation in the operational art, Grant had to fight a war in which innovation characterized the operational art. Likewise, Adolphus and Napoleon used their operationally superior armies to achieve their strategic ends where as Grant could not. Grant's end state of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>35</sup> Major General John Frederick Charles Fuller, *Grant and Lee, A Study in Personality and Generalship*, 45.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 257.



destroying the Confederates army was the same as his operational goal. He simply won by having the capacity to attrite more troops than his adversaries have and accepted the risk while keeping his vision aimed at the strategic end state.

There is no doubt that each Great Captain examined in this paper mastered the operational art. However, there is little evidence to show that any of them sought or used new theory in waging war. They simply mastered combat at a time and place in history to a degree that enabled them to defeat their enemies. A large portion of their successes were the results of superb leadership.

## **LEADERSHIP AND GENERALSHIP**

Much like determining what a Great Captain is, many have sought to delineate those qualities and characteristics of a great General. There is no doubt that each Great Captain and General throughout history has been one of a kind. One historian proposed the following characteristics: (1) intellectual ability and the talent for self-education (2) realistic and practical (3) dedicated and hardworking (4) courageous (5) foresight (6) physical and mental health (7) and the ability to withstand temporary setbacks and disappointments and judge them clearly.<sup>37</sup> Each of the Great Captains addressed in this paper possessed some of these characteristics during the height of their career.

Adolphus has gone down in history as the champion of Protestantism.<sup>38</sup> Though this might be what he is remembered for it does not tell us why his men followed him. His disposition and character was frank, generous, and kind.<sup>39</sup> He is also most likely the

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<sup>37</sup> Lt Col G. F. Freudenberg, "The Qualities of a General," *Military Affairs*, 1981.

<sup>38</sup> Liddell Hart, *Great Captains Unveiled*, 90.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

most humane Great Captain ever to wage war even after being wounded thirteen times by the enemy in combat.<sup>40</sup> He did expect and extract the highest levels of discipline from his troops while treating them with mutual respect and fairly distributing punishment when appropriate. His treatment of his troops went beyond that notional interjection of words; he fed them well, started a medical service and ensured that commissaries were in place to provide supplies.<sup>41</sup> His values which were rooted in deep religious beliefs were also perpetuated throughout the military. Religion was not only the hallmark of his invasions into modern day Germany, but he mandated morning and evening prayer and issued a soldiers prayer book as well.<sup>42</sup> Using religion as an underlying motivational tool was paramount to his success. Napoleon on the other hand would use the ideology of a new nation to motivate his troops.

Revolutionary ideas in France leading up to Napoleon's reign certainly gave his soldiers a reason to fight, the ideology of a new France. An idea in itself does not motivate troops, nor will pure gusto without an ideological foundation. The idea of a better France coupled with superb leadership provides the cornerstone of Napoleon's leadership and generalship styles. Napoleon's physical statue might have been less than daunting but his personality and couth in dealing with people was extremely effective if not somewhat mysterious. "Nevertheless, all who met him were instantly struck by his natural authority...he had in his power to place in thrall the soul of almost any man or

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 110.

woman he encountered.”<sup>43</sup> He would use these skills repeatedly to subdue anyone that he wanted something from. He would systematically use this hypnotic fascination and magnetism on many an occasion to obtain his way, frequently in a theatrical manner.<sup>44</sup> This may be indicative of his leadership style in working with people. His generalship style was about knowing the details and being readily prepared for any encounter. Napoleon would spend very long days scouring maps and documents, dictating orders and so forth. He was a very busy person and certainly a workaholic especially on the eve of battle. These two aspects of Napoleon’s leadership style were to follow him throughout his career. This was a rare combination of leadership traits but Napoleon was able to make it work, and he made it work well. Though Napoleon used an unorthodox combination of leadership styles, Grant would be much less theatrical in leading his troops.

Grant did not engage his subordinates in a theatrical manner or use showmanship. His leadership style was a direct reflection of his personality as they both evolved during his career in the army. The foundation of his personality was that he was fighting for authority while his enemy was fighting for liberty.<sup>45</sup> Coupled with this was his limitless resolution toward the cause of the war, being to abolish slavery.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, “Grant’s ability to achieve great results without fuss or ostentation or by doing anything to attract attention to himself was not, as most officers around him supposed, a sign that he was,

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<sup>43</sup> Chandler, *Napolean*, 153.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Fuller, *Grant and Lee, A Study in Personality and Generalship*, 278.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 280.

after all, not so very different from themselves.”<sup>47</sup> Thus, Grant’s soldiers viewed him as a person that did not glorify his presence in front of them. Grant considered himself as much as a soldier as the men he led into battle and would fight the enemy at close range and at times on the front lines. He did not do this to espouse bravery or charisma as other Generals have.<sup>48</sup> As would be expected, “Grant found moral courage to be rarer and more ennobling than physical bravery.”<sup>49</sup> Being highly moralistic, patriotic and exuding authority from a very shy person provided a unique leadership concoction that captured the will of his troops.

There are many reasons that people follow leaders. Simplifying the rationale, people follow leaders because of the power and influence of their ideas. Garnering commitment to leaders by followers is through (1) a charismatic personality, (2) promises of social order, (3) promises of salvation through religious insight, (4) promises of glory and booty, and (5) promises of understanding through knowledge.<sup>50</sup> Given these insights, it is understandable why each of these Great Captains were great leaders in their times. Adolphus used religion as a foundation, Napoleon was extremely charismatic and Grant sought to provide social order. Each technique was the right venue for their time and place in history.

## **SAVOIR-FAIRE OF ETHOS**

“Societies are products of environments altered in many ways by large

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<sup>47</sup> Perret, *Ulysses S. Grant Soldier and President*, 277.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>50</sup> James K. Feibleman, *Ironies of History: Leaders and Misleaders of Humankind* (New York: Horizon Press, 1980) 200.

populations engaged in great cooperative efforts focused on some world leader.”<sup>51</sup> Each Great Captain was a member of a society in which they could wield their influence. How they would influence their society, or more directly, how they would control their society was the result of varying circumstances. What is important to understand is that for each Great Captain examined in this paper is that they each had a society that was emotionally captivated and vulnerable for varying socio-political events beyond the control of its citizens. Which to rectify their insecurities these citizens embraced a leader that provided the means to solve their problems, or so they thought. Understanding the importance of knowing your people, each Great Captain leveraged their society’s issues to garner the political advantage they themselves deemed appropriate.

The Great Captains were very cognoscente that their armies were merely a tool to gain the political end state that they sought. Certainly, there were other aspects to gaining their long-term goals but each Great Captain primarily used their military to achieve results. In some case, such as Grant, the military was the only option that he had to get to his end state. Napoleon and Adolphus could have used more soft power in pursuing their goals but opted for hard power solutions. Though the army was the key to each Great Captain’s success, how they used the army is more telling.

The political decisions that the Great Captains made were based on the capabilities of their armies. Each Great Captain sought to either build or destroy a nation using the army as the means to accomplish their goal. Grant used the Union Army to validate the prudence of a single nation by defeating the Confederate Army and forcefully reuniting the north and the south. Napoleon used his army to expand his

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 202.

territorial gain or destroy his enemy's capacity to fight. In fact, most of Napoleon's campaigns exemplified the strategy of annihilation or overthrow.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Adolphus fought for territorial integrity and sought to destroy the Holy Roman Empire's strangle on northern Europe. In essence, he sought to destroy the Holy Roman Empire even though he never succeeded. As history shows, each Great Captain used their military to achieve political gains beyond their borders and just not a defense. In essence, they were preemptive in their notions to pursue their political-military objectives.

## ANALYSIS

Some people are familiar with the saying that "success is when opportunity meets preparation." This makes sense at the outset but expanding it further one might view this saying in another way. Preparation may be further divided into two categories of will and skill. To achieve something people need to have both the will to do it and skill to execute their will. Thus, transforming the familiar saying to "will plus skill plus opportunity equal success" is more appropriate. With this notion in mind, many scholars and web "bloggers" have extensively argued what makes a Great Captain based upon successes. The arguments are circular and distill into who conquered the most territory, reigned the longest, who was the best tactician on the battlefield and so forth. This paper does not subscribe to those notions. This paper purposely provided the background and links to traits and thoughts associated with potential Great Captains to resolve the issue of what makes a Great Captain.

The will to succeed is a combination of various elements. Principles among the notion of will are personality, character and values. Great Captains tend to have a cross

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<sup>52</sup> John R. Elting, *The Superstrategists: Great Captains, Theorists, and Fighting Men Who Have Shaped the History of Warfare* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1985), 4.

section of personality types. Napoleon was very aggressive, Grant was introverted and shy and Adolphus was extroverted. Even though they were different, each used their type of personality to suit their needs. Therefore, defining a specific personality type to a Great Captain is not possible. The character of each Great Captain examined was similar. They each exuded notions to succeed but would accept failure. Failure did not wane their will to succeed. They each sought to succeed in every encounter but would acknowledge failure or defeat knowing that doing so could provide an opportunity to succeed in the future. The third principle of will evident to each Great Captain was they possessed values for which they stood firm to. Grant's ideology of a single nation and a vehement distaste for slavery was apparent amongst all that served with him. Those values were drawn from his youth and carried with him all the way into his Presidency. Similarly, Adolphus' values regarding religion were very well known and fully incorporated into his army and the foundation of his invasion into northern Europe. Lastly, Napoleon did not exude any profound set of values. What he did carry was an attachment to being Corsican. This is important because his view of culture as it emerged in France during the late 1700s was very different from what he learned as a child in Corsica. Similarly, Grant associated many of his decisions with the beliefs that were deeply rooted in his youth. Each Great Captain possessed a strong but varying will to succeed and how they obtained that will was very similar.

The will of each Great Captain was sculpted in a similar manner but yielded different results. The common denominator to each of them was a strong influence from their family at an early age. Their families had a significant impact on how they viewed culture and reacted to society. Each of them also had motivation associated with their

childhood that underpinned their need to succeed. Simply said, their youth invoked adversity for which they always sought to overcome. Grant desperately sought not to be a tanner like his father and wanted a college education to escape such a lifestyle.

Adolphus, growing up as the King's son cast doubt about his abilities for which he took great pains to overcome, especially after he became King at such a young age. Lastly, Napoleon was forever the Corsican and had to prove his worth as a true Frenchman. The similarities between each Great Captain here shows that adversarial motivation spawning from their youth intertwined with their cultural view provided ample willingness to succeed. If they each had the will to succeed, did they possess the necessary skill to achieve their goals?

Great Captain may have possessed all of the desire in the world to achieve their goals but could not have done so without the ability or skill to do so. The skills necessary to become a Great Captain are a high mental capacity, military expertise, and politically keen. Mental capacity is further broken down into genius and education. Military expertise is comprised of leadership, operational art, and planning.

"The accidents of upbringing which allow for the perception of different elements in the environment, combined with the native ability to see connections between them not previously observed, certainly are two of the factors involved" in genius.<sup>53</sup> Each Great Captain examined in this paper exhibited characteristics conducive of being a genius. Certainly not enough to call them genius but enough to say they could have been a genius. Relating to each person studied in this examination were references that stated that each man was in fact genius. Whether they were or not will never been known

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<sup>53</sup> Feibleman, *Ironies of History: Leaders and Misleaders of Humankind*, 204.



because they cannot be examined by modern day testing. However, the fact that peers and subordinates alike referenced their mental capacity as being superior does take with it some credibility. Being a genius was not enough. Harnessing their mental capacity was not the issue. They needed to have their abilities expanded and broadened, which they did by being promoted with further encumbrances and issues to solve. They were all perpetual students and sought to expand their knowledge when possible. Additionally, learning languages of their foes and allies alike proved beneficial. In addition to their ability to grasp, harness and digest copious sums of information, they needed to be an expert in military operations.

Each Great Captain learned to lead an army. How they learned the military art varied from case to case. Napoleon likely had the most formal training starting at a young age in military schools. Grant had no military experience until he attended West Point as a teenager. Adolphus was exposed to military matters and art from a young age but had far less practical experience in followership before learning to lead. Whichever way they learned to become soldiers is less important than the fact that they learned to be effective soldiers and leaders. The one similarity is that they each had embarked on a military career early in their life. In addition to becoming great leaders within their militaries each would become experts at waging war, that is, they would become experts in the operational art. Many scholars have argued that to be a Great Captain one must have not only been a great leader but an innovator in the operational art. This paper disagrees with that notion as each person examined in this paper only evolved the operational art and did not significantly change the art of war so much that it be considered innovation. The Great Captains were certainly master battlefield tacticians

and were only challenged by the most capable opponents. However, each Great Captain also paid particular attention to their logistical needs. They each were well aware of their lifeline to wage war and would do most anything to protect their lines of communication. As with any logistical effort, they were all superb planners. Each would spend an immense amount of effort ensuring that every detail was covered and that they understood the details. They would consider branches and sequels for every possible contingency prior to engaging the enemy and then would act as a conductor of sorts once battle started. In essence, they had preplanned their every move prior to the first shot being fired. When the plan failed to yield desired results, they would rely on their instincts and intuition to resolve pertinent issues to get their plan back on track. They were always planning and thinking as far ahead as possible while engaged in battle. Keeping ahead of the enemy during a fight was difficult; however, Great Captains knew and understood the political ramifications of success or failure on the battlefield.

The least tangible skill that each Great Captain possessed was that of being a great politician. They were each politically savvy and could manipulate relationships between governments to get their terms. Napoleon was well acquainted with decisively defeating his enemy and then making steep demands, he thought appropriate and prudent to further his geopolitical ambitions. Adolphus would also use battlefield success in the Baltic region to garner the end states he desired, typically alliances and treaties in the form of armistices. Grant on the other hand knew that his victorious end of the Civil war would reap his single most important end state, that of reunifying the United States. Each Great Captain's understanding of using their military in conjunction with politics was immense. It is also noted that each of them was the leader of their country whether it be King,

Emperor or President. Given the great skill set that each person obtained during their lives was not enough, sometimes luck and chance play a significant role.

The will and skill of the Great Captains examined in this paper is without question. Nevertheless, to say that being a Great Captain one only needs will and skill is not true. One must be able to apply their will and capable skills to the right set of opportunities to be a Great Captain. Many people throughout time have possessed the will and skill but did not have the right set of circumstances to achieve the status of a Great Captain. So what makes a Great Captain so special if they have the same will and skill as hundreds of other people? They each found and exploited an opportunity.

The third major ingredient to being a Great Captain is happening upon an opportunity to exploit. More succinctly, each Great Captain examined in this paper had superb timing in a historical context to achieve what they did. Imagine if Corsica was not ceded to France and Napoleon was not a Frenchman, or if the U.S. Civil War did not take place or ended after a few skirmishes, or perhaps, if Adolphus's father had lived much longer and the Kingship of Sweden did not pass for another 30 years? If any one of these events had happened then it is quite possible that we would not know these men from any other. It is then perhaps that chance and luck had a large part in making them Great Captains. In addition to opportune timing, each Great Captain examined also had other similar time-based circumstances.

“Societies float in a medium of accepted ideas, and entertain attitudes and activities expressive of all current shades of opinion. Those men whose thoughts are the most relevant to existing circumstances are the ones who rise to the surface and make

their presence felt.”<sup>54</sup> This statement is directly applicable to Great Captains. They each harnessed society’s needs at a time and place conducive to their own values. Distilled even further, one can correlate that each Great Captain’s values paralleled those needs of a society that would feed their armies in rectifying a cause deemed appropriate by the masses. The will of the people was ripe to be subdued and society sought to follow leaders that could justify the means for a better end state. Napoleon could have never gained control of France had there not been the French revolution. Similarly, Grant found himself in a situation where society was in strife over slavery. Correspondingly, Adolphus sensed Sweden’s intolerance for religious fueled threats from Germany. In each case the societies viewed the cause as just and the corresponding Great Captain capitalized upon that energy to achieve their goals. Though timing and social strife played a significant role in providing the right set circumstances, it would be naught without a means to enact upon them.

The means by which each Great Captain had to execute their goals was a military. If everything else discussed in this paper had occurred but these great leaders lacked a pungent military, then they would have had much less success in achieving their goals. This is not to say that each Great Captain did not grow and nurture their military, they did. Nevertheless, each of them had a significant structure in place to wage war when they garnered positions of power. It could be argued that one could raise a military in a few years but then a key opportunity may have passed. Contrary, a quickly sewn military may have not had the needed discipline or expertise to function the way the Great Captain needed. Napoleon by far had the most robust and war-hardened military of the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 144.

three men examined. He needed to do little to make them battlefield ready. Adolphus had access to an experienced military but it was not a standing army at the beginning of his reign. One might argue that Grant had to train all of his men from scratch but the mechanism to put trained troops in the field already existed. Summarizing, each Great Captain had an immediate capability to use military forces to achieve their goals.

## **CONCLUSION**

Great Captains are not born, but the product of a strong education and varying life experiences, which gives them the tools to master their national ethos. The will of a man to be great is nurtured in their youth. Personality and character are also formed while they are young. Combining superb intellect and a motivation to achieve something grander in life, Great Captains often recognize that the military provides a means to achieve greatness. Once recognized, Great Captains use the military to build and sharpen their leadership and interpersonal skills garnering political power. When these facets fall into place they recognize then seize the initiative at a time and place where their society yearns to support their political endeavors. Armed with this information, it is possible to prospect future leaders, appropriately guide and develop their maturation defining the cultural ethos of tomorrow's political military society.

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